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Lively tale of political murder ignores many facts

TRUJILLO: The Death of the Goat. By Bernard Diederich. Little, Brown. \$9.95.

By John Bartlow Martin

THIS IS a lively, journalistic account of the assassination of Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo y Molina. It does not alter substantially the main outlines of the assassination as they have already been revealed, but it does fill in many details of interest to students of the subject. It is at its best in reconstructing the events of the night of May 30, 1961, the assassination night (though it varies from certain eyewitness accounts). The followup section near the end, telling us what happened later to some of the principal actors, is useful.

It is both the strength and the weakness of Diederich's book that it appears—unfortunately, he rarely cites sources—to have been written largely from interviews and first-hand observation. Diederich, a U.S. journalist, witnessed some of the events he describes, and he apparently has interviewed nearly everybody available. This gives his book immediacy. At the same time, it leads him to print unsubstantiated rumor and mere gossip. And by ignoring or failing to gain access to various published works and unpublished documents, he has weakened his book. Only a brave man will try to make sense out of Dominican affairs. He needs all the help he can get.

The writing itself contains flaws—faulty organization, unclear writing, clichés and invented scenes and dialog.

MORE SERIOUS ARE certain substantive matters in Diederich's text. Puerto Rico is not a member of the Organization of American States, as the author seems to think. It is by no means clear that the Unión Cívica Nacional, a political party, resulted directly from the death of Dr. Robert Reid and even less clear that it was "nurtured in secret" or that it "was to spearhead the expulsion of the Trujillos from power." Nor, for that matter, did the 14th of June movement have anything directly to do with the assassination, though Diederich seems to imply it did. Diederich frequently presents great gobs of data, presumably factual, though undocumented, without telling us its meaning.

Diederich accepts at face value the common view that Trujillo ordered the murder of Dr. Jesús de Galíndez, a Dominican teacher in New York, because Galíndez had written a scholarly dissertation mildly criticizing Trujillo's regime, a notion I have never been able to swallow. (Why and how Galíndez was murdered remain real mysteries.) Diederich's grasp of U.S. diplomatic practice seems loose—the State Department does not "inform" an ambassador what to do, it instructs him; it seems highly unlikely that, as the author says, the United States consul "had taken it upon himself" without department instruction to investigate the death of Octavio de la Maza, a purely domestic political murder inside the Republic, and what he means by saying the ranking U.S. official in the Republic sent a letter to "the special assistant at the State Department" is wholly incomprehensible. His treatment of the late John Calvin Hill, our chargé at that time, would strike many knowledgeable people as fiction.

THE BOOK has two shortcomings, even more serious. First, so intent is Diederich on his detective story that he almost wholly neglects important forces that were in play. Thus he fails to deal with the larger aspects of the shifting U.S. policy in the Caribbean at that time; he scarcely mentions the crippling OAS economic sanctions against the Republic; he barely mentions the broader currents in the Caribbean that had brought down so many other dictators. He has treated Trujillo's assassination as an isolated event, a celebrated crime, but it was, rather, part of an historical process. Nor has he dealt adequately with the policy of President John F. Kennedy, who, following Trujillo's assassination, being determined to help the Dominican people construct a democratic society on the ruins of tyranny, first sent emissaries to negotiate the Trujillo heirs out of the Republic and then, failing, sent the U.S. fleet to throw them out.

Second, the CIA's role: Here we—and Diederich—are on treacherous ground, for many knowledgeable people are dead and not all the documents have been declassified. Diederich, however, concludes flatly, "Was the CIA the principal partner of the assassins in this act of tyranny? There is no doubt that the CIA was an accomplice." Nothing in his text justifies that conclusion. Early in his book he simply repeats unsubstantiated tales that were current in the Republic after the assassination. Later he examines the evidence dredged up recently by Sen. Frank Church's Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, and here he fudges.

For example, at crucial points he lapses into the passive (and this is more than a grammatical point). He writes: "Repeated requests were sent to the American consulate to supply explosives"—"were sent," indeed. By whom? And what was the response? "A request was forwarded in February to the 'Americans' for a couple of M-3 .45-caliber submachineguns." Same questions. "An order for fragmentation grenades was passed on to the CIA in Washington." Ditto. Diederich makes much of the passing around of various guns, as did the Church committee, but he has misunderstood the committee's own findings, as when he says the assassins

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possessed three .38-caliber Smith & Wessons shipped from Washington by the CIA in a diplomatic pouch; they did not. Furthermore, the assassins did not need guns; they had access to Dominican military guns.

The matter is almost hopelessly muddled—the death of Trujillo is probably the most badly bungled successful murder plot and the most badly confused murder investigation in history—but I can say with as much certitude as is possible in such a tangle that, first, the U.S. government, or at least some of its high officials, under both Eisenhower and Kennedy, desired Trujillo's overthrow and did not care if he was assassinated; second, the CIA was in touch with certain conspirators against Trujillo (a great many separate plots were afoot that spring of 1961); third, the CIA did nothing to help the conspirators who actually succeeded in killing him and, in fact, it did nothing at all effective to promote his death, and fourth, the killers had their own weapons and none of them was provided by the CIA.

So far as is known, the assassination was a Dominican affair. It is fashionable these days to beat up on the CIA, and no doubt it has some lumps coming, but when one expresses revulsion that it may have been involved in this particular assassination, one ought to bear in mind that nothing is proved—and one might also bear in mind who it was, after all, that was being assassinated.

President John F. Kennedy sent John Bartlow Martin to the Dominican Republic on a fact-finding mission three months after Trujillo's death. In March, 1972, Martin was appointed U.S. ambassador to the country. Now a journalism professor at Northwestern University, Martin is Adlai Stevenson's biographer.